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SUBJECT: MDC OFFICIALS ON ELECTION PLANS, INTER-PARTY
RELATIONS

REF: HARARE 1562

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher W. Dell under Section 1.5 b/d

11. (C) SUMMARY: During a lunch at the Residence on December 8, MDC National Campaign Coordinator Ian Makoni and MDC MP (Mutare) Innocent Gonese updated the Ambassador on MDC election plans and inter-party relations. They reported that the MDC was better organized than it had been in previous elections and was exploiting gradually opening campaign space. The pair asserted that the opposition could win 85 of the 120 seats under the best of circumstances, that 60 would be a practical victory, and that 40 would likely be the low end absent massive fraud. END SUMMARY.

Election Preparations

12. (C) According to Makoni, the MDC's election strategy had four pillars: (1) pressure for free and fair elections; (2) preparation for the elections; (3) campaigning; and (4) securing the vote. He asserted that the party had learned lessons from previous elections, when it had underestimated the extent to which the ruling party would rig the election. This year the party would likely eschew street action in favor of focusing on the polling station. He acknowledged that International Republican Institute representatives who were working with the party were disappointed not to see more visible activism, but stressed the importance of grassroots electoral organization, which was "almost done." Gonese added that full access to the media was the potential key to an MDC success in the elections.

13. (C) Makoni reported that the opposition was much better organized than it had been for the national parliamentary elections in 2000 or the presidential election in 2002. This would be the first time the party had structures all the way down to the village level. The party previously relied largely on establishing an emotional connection with the electorate; now it had recognized individuals who could engage on a personal level in practically every community. This would be especially important on election day if the party hoped to counter an intimidating ZANU-PF presence at many polling stations. In this vein, Makoni reported that MDC voters would be encouraged to remain at polling stations after they had voted -- a safety-in-numbers strategy. The party nonetheless still needed to develop more street-level structures analogous to the ZANU-PF cells. The two conceded that there were frictions within the opposition but maintained that Morgan Tsvangirai continued to enjoy broad and deep support throughout the party.

14. (C) The pair confirmed that the party was continuing to see more campaign space in some areas (a trend noted three months ago in reftel). Police were being more responsive to applications for meetings and were suppressing violence in some areas on a non-partisan basis. Chiefs and war veterans in certain areas were actively contributing to a lowering of temperatures, and party supporters were wearing MDC T-shirts in areas previously regarded as "no-go" zones. No-go areas remained and intimidation continued to be a significant obstacle but party structures were alert to exploit space as it opened.

Election Prospects

15. (C) Makoni and Gonese ruminated on their party's prospects for the March parliamentary elections. Makoni said he considered 40 seats "safe" for the MDC and another 45 "marginal" seats that could go either way. (N.B. Leaving 35 safe seats for ZANU-PF.) He said for the opposition to win 85 seats the election playing field would have to be level. Realistically, the MDC hoped to get 60 seats -- half the 120 contested seats (30 more seats are appointed by the President) -- which would be a significant moral and practical victory. If the party were able to win an outright majority of the seats, it would not change the actual imbalance of power given the executive's dominant authority under the constitution, but it could force ZANU-PF to deal with the MDC. Even the low end of 40 seats would be a success in the sense of consolidating the tradition of a

significant opposition presence in Zimbabwe's parliament.

Speculating on Ruling Party Intentions

16. (C) Asked to comment on ruling party intentions, the pair dismissed the possibility that the GOZ would conduct by-elections to fill the seats recently vacated by MDC MP Stanley Makwembebe's death and MDC MP Roy Bennett's incarceration. (Note: If won by ZANU-PF, the two seats would give it a 2/3 majority in Parliament -- sufficient to amend the constitution on its own. End note.) Bennett was appealing and there was insufficient time to give adequate legal notice and conduct the elections in any event, especially given the ruling party's absorption with its legislative agenda and primaries. Moreover, ZANU-PF was confident it would win a 2/3 majority in the March election and planned to engineer the constitutional amendment then.

17. (C) Makoni noted the convergence of interests within ZANU-PF for a new constitution and prospects for Mugabe to step down. The new constitution was expected to require that a Vice-President assume the Presidency for the remainder of the President's term if he stepped down, instead of requiring a national election within 90 days as stipulated by the current constitution. This essentially would permit Mugabe to have his chosen successor remain in office for an extended period, rather than submit to the uncertainty or potential divisiveness of an immediate election. Makoni speculated that Mugabe would then run in 2008, only to step down quickly in favor of a presumably trusted successor to hold office (and protect him) until 2014.

18. (C) The pair expressed little doubt that Mugabe would be able to hold his party together for the foreseeable future, notwithstanding the very real divisions exposed in the run-up to the ZANU-PF Party Congress. They forecast that many of the upcoming ZANU-PF primaries would be tense, not so much over tribal issues as intense personal rivalries.

Comment

19. (C) The substance and tenor of the pair's remarks give every indication that the MDC will eventually end its "conditional suspension of participation" in the March elections. Re-entry into the race poses some interesting challenges to the opposition, though. Given its stated condition for re-entry -- a level playing field -- re-entry risks conferring some implicit degree of legitimacy on ZANU-PF's superficial measures to address electoral imbalances. At the same time, the ruling party shows growing signs of wanting the MDC in the election so as to confer legitimacy, so re-entry is a substantive political chit (one of the few that the MDC holds) for which the MDC will want to derive maximum payment. Re-entry also will technically qualify the MDC for access to the state media pursuant to SADC electoral principles and guidelines to which the GOZ has subscribed. Finally, officially rejoining the race and campaigning more vigorously may provoke an increase in political violence that so far has remained below historical levels associated with elections. The party's national executive reportedly will meet this weekend to reconsider its participation.

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